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Non-Spending in Secret for Defense

Big Budgets Impress Soviets, So Dummy Outlays Could Help

By ROBERT WESSON

From near the beginning of time military costs have been a special problem. There have long been reports of scandalous prices—of military coffee pots costing more than a new car, \$400 screwdrivers, seat covers worth their weight in gold, and the like. They are treated as mistakes and are investigated, and we assume that such things won't recur, but they come up again and again. They and the cost overruns and the overengineered machines that don't work very well are such a recurrent story that they must be considered part of the military way of doing business.

Why should this be? Government purchase ordinarily means high prices; public schools cost about twice as much as those privately built. But there are no reports of such outrageous overcharging in other departments such as Interior or the General Services Administration.

Unhappily, in the military even more than in the bureaucracy in general, there is little incentive to save money and much to spend it. One reason is the feeling that defense is supremely important, so nothing but the best is good enough, and it is naturally assumed that more expensive means better. Counting pennies isn't in the military mindset. Forced into it, the generals will admit comparative bidding, but they don't like it and find reasons to avoid it. Nearly all purchases are thus by negotiation, in which procurers have little reason to question prices asked by suppliers. There have been many reforms and controls, but they don't help much because the mentality dictates free spending.

It is in a sense the function of the military to spend money, and performance is necessarily measured largely in terms of how much is spent. This is the chief yardstick of importance, just as in the bureaucracy the worth of a chief is how many persons are under him. Guns are seldom fired in anger, tanks and planes do not meet in combat, and there is no general way to express the quantity of defense readiness except in terms of what it costs. Similarly, the importance of service branches can be compared only in terms of their budgets, and the perennial rivalry of the branches becomes a contest to secure the maximum slice of the budget.

This pertains equally or more to the comparison of Soviet and American forces. Unless or until they are put to the task of destruction, it is difficult and subjective to rate the one side against the other, but it is clear and simple how much is spent, at least on the American side. The chief information that we have as to the power of our own defenses, now or in the future and compared to the past, is how much they cost. To spend more is to be stronger; obviously to spend less is to be weaker.

This creates a dilemma for Congress. The military budget is the open and loud message to the Soviets of American resolve and strength, the clearest and most powerful signal. It is plausibly stated that the American military buildup, as shown by the defense budget, brings the Soviets to the bargaining table, and it is quite probable that they have been more cautious because of it. On the other hand, if defense expenditures were cut or severely checked it would be a license for them to be tough in all areas. Not only would they assume that American forces were less threatening, they would also deduce, quite rationally, that the American will to play a major part in world affairs was weakening.

This puts Congress in a bind as it faces the need to reduce outlays without raising the anger of Social Security recipients. There is an answer, however: It is to *seem* to be spending huge amounts for defense—since the seeming is the important thing vis-a-vis the world—without really doing so. This could be accomplished by

making the big military appropriations for the benefit of the media, with the secret proviso that most of the money go to college loans, Amtrak, Medicare and so forth. This would be just the inverse of the Soviet policy of putting a diminutive appropriation for defense in the public budget and covering about 90% of military costs from money ostensibly appropriated for industry, science, education, etc.

Another approach would be to authorize impressive amounts for the services and then reward officers with a percentage of whatever they quietly returned to the Treasury. Then the Navy could gloat in the amount that it received in comparison with the Air Force, without having to spend it, and ships would come out leaner but probably no less impressive in battle array.

This proposal is not so absurd as it may

seem at first glance, because a substantial proportion of the U.S. budget is already secret. (Just how much is spent on the CIA?) If expenses can be kept hidden, surely non-expenses can also.

Moreover, it is basically realistic. The only acceptable purpose of nuclear weapons is psychological, to deter war or aggression, and dummy rockets would serve this purpose quite as well as real ones as long as the world thought that they were real—perhaps even as long as the world thought that they might be real. Similarly, for negotiating purposes, dummy appropriations would be quite as useful as real ones. And much lighter on the budget.

Robert Wesson is a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.